The Level of Elite Cohesiveness in East Asia Modernization

XUESHAN YU

Introduction

1860 was a kink even Emperor Xianfeng, handy with all his Machiavellian tactics, couldn't iron out. The Eight-Power Allied force was at gate, pointing their made-in-Europe canons towards the Qing spears, the grassroots Taiping Rebellion down south, and Russia, flared by its newly expansionary ambition, up in the northern borders. Yet, self-exiled from the Forbidden City (and symbolically the political center), Emperor Xianfeng comforted himself that he would at least outperform Prince Gong once again, after the succession fight decades before. By passing the sovereign power to Prince Gong and his faction, the Emperor passed them curses as well. Situations in due time left Prince Gong no other strategy but to surrender to the alleged enemies. This political landslide in China shocked the Tokugawa rulers in Japan, and they soon realized that the same ferments disintegrating China--domestic uprisings and colonial penetrations, would very likely one day inflict Japan. As a result, pro-west liberalism mushroomed across Satcho and Choshu ports while the Shogun clamped down to enhance domestic control--within years this antagonism would crystallize into a civil war and dismantle the Tokugawa reign. As if overnight these two Asian empires collapsed and it was up to the oligarchs in the Imperial Court (or roju, the shogunate cabinet before 1868) to rescue the empires. Later, as China and Japan modernized in the 1860s, it was also up to these oligarchs to initiate modernization.

Oligarchies in nature, Japan and China rely on the elite consensus in policy making, and my paper will compare and contrast how the level of elite cohesiveness decides the fate the Self-Strengthening Movements (1861-1894) in China and Meiji Restoration (1868-1894) in Japan before 1895. Japan triumphed China in the 1895 War. The most deadly weapons had not been gun powder, canons or fleets as the Chinese reform director, Li Hongzhang, once perceived after Japan's victory. Rather, under the Meiji leaders' collective efforts, a united elite class, with byproducts such as modern nationalism, coordinated social mobilization and governing coherency, was the secret recipe for success.

My paper will examine the level of elite cohesiveness during Japan's Meiji Restoration and China's Self-strengthening Movement before the first Sino-Japan War, and how it decides the final outcomes of these modernization efforts. The first section revisits some misconceptions contributing to the lags of such study in the China-Japan case. The second section delves into the elite structure, origins and powers in China and Japan, explaining how these patterns influence the level of elite cohesiveness. The third section assesses the impacts of elite fragmentation or unity on modernization efforts.
Revisiting Former Studies

Scholars sweat on supply-side analysis on China's and Russia's modernizations, attributing the Sino-Nippon differences to reform measures, domestic institutions and even political cultures. In contrast, demand-side researches on interests groups or the policy-making process are minimal. This unequal treatment is understandable, since neither China nor Japan knew subject citizens or participatory constituencies before their first wave of modernization. Therefore, the demand side seems derive only from governing elites' monotonous demands, rather than contending societal interests. In closer examination, however, different elite groups in 1860s China and Japan: the imperial, local and village elites shattered the monotony, leading to a fragmented governance of alliance-building and back-stabbing as all groups sought to self-serving. Consequently, stake players reached an institutional equilibrium in which they made policies on a consensus-base. Thus the demand-side analysis will help us to look into the policy making process ignored but puzzling the supply-side oriented scholars. Two other misunderstandings explain the dearth of researches. For one thing, the Europeans' engagement in Southeast Asia as doorway to China and Japan had facilitated a Eurocentric approach towards Asia as a whole. Since the local population, disseminated across sedated agricultural plantations, rice paddies and mining lots, and alienated by struggles for maritime supremacy (mainly through piracy), were interests-driven profit seekers rather than hard-line nationalists, they didn't rise to protest the colonial reign. Craving for power and wealth, the local elites soon fell to vassal administrators for the colonial masters. Achieving success in the South East Asia, colonialists carried the patterns of cooperating with the governing class to their quest for East Asia. Naturally, the interactions between the colonial powers and the governing elites thus became the most meaningful relations as seen by western scholars. However, by taking a revisionist approach, we find that nationalism already prevailed in East Asia, from the evidences of two domestic uprisings during the mid-19th century in China and Japan. Though with different focuses, they share a feature of "ideology fight" against feudal rulers for the countries' future: The Taiping Rebellion (1860-1864) and the Japanese anti-Bakufu (Toubakundo) campaigns (1865-1868).¹

Ethnic Hans initiated the Taiping Rebellion, a nationalist movement against the Qing rule, shouting "expel the barbarians and restore China." "Barbarian" not only expressed a condescending nationalist view on the ethnic Mans, ruling class of Qing, but also a discontent with Qing's signing of a waterfall of unequal treaties and the extra tax levied ensued to pay for the treaties' financial terms. Paradoxically, instead of toppling Man's reign, the Taiping rebellion soothed the rift between Man and Hans since the central government recruited Han officials from Hunan and Anhui provinces to organize the campaigns against the Taiping armies. These officials yielded enormous local autonomy by monopolizing budgetary and personnel issues. Eventually, they would reach the political apex in the late 20th century. Qing itself, though condemned by the Taiping alliances as a traitor, had higher aspirations than being a colonial courier: Qing was very upset to lose the hegemony status and become a subordinate of western powers, thus it had all incentives to restore domestic order and seek for development. Emperors in late imperial periods (Tongzhi, Guang Xu) initiated reforms adapting to western technologies while resisted political

and ideological penetrations. However, foreign powers, mainly Britain and France, opposed these reforms in fear that the strengthening of China would lessen the colonial economies' comparative advantages. Yet, internal chaos of China's political system played a more disruptive role, as reforms were halted by factional fights. Foreign powers might enjoy political windfalls from fragmented politics, but they never directly controlled Qing, nor had the Qing court downgraded itself to a colonial vassal.

Japan's Anti-Bakufu Campaigns, with its slogan “Revere the emperor and repulse the foreigners”, blazed nationalism in the same intensity. At first the daimyos directed forces against the immediate presence of colonial powers. Later, the Choshu- Satsuma factions, inspired by their prototype capitalist interests, came to realize that Tokugawa's feudal system, Sakoku, which failed to accommodate industrialization systematically, but not the colonial threats, were Japan's major hindrance towards independence and prosperity, and thus they turned against the Tokugawa rule. The “foreigners”, then the British, assisted the daimyos technically and financially in hope that once the Daimyos gain power positions, they would accept Britain into the Japanese markets. The British didn’t get what they want, as the Daimyos, once took control of the government, quickly re-establishment of the authority of the Emperor and adopted the parliamentary system -these measures institutionally banished the ruling class, and thus curtailed foreign influences and prepared Japan for reforms. Japan’s centrifugal power, the Choshu-Satsuma coalition, as Ward suggests, “behaved as if their main concerns, other than self-interest or local interest, were for the identity and inviolability of their country.”

Despite their nationalist efforts, China and Japan ended up several effective unequal treaties granting foreign powers tariff and extraterritorial privileges by the early 1860s, yet the specific terms in the treaties still need the local governing class to carry out. With such consideration, the colonial powers allied with the powerful in China and Japan to secure the privileges. Operating power politics instead of diplomatic relations revealed that the colonial priority focused on the security of economic extraction. The colonialists didn't have either the incentives or the interests to judge the domestic politics of their colonies. While nouveau riche class as vassals of colonial powers in both countries did exist, as Mai Ban (or deputy trader) in China and some merchant in opened-up ports in Japan, who profited from trading foreign goods, the cooperation of foreign powers and local ones happened at an individual level rather than organization ones in the mid 19th century. We must respect the countries' nationalism, which would either fuel development or halt it with regard to the level of elite cohesiveness.

**Being One of the Elites**

Esherick classifies the Tongzhi Chinese and Meiji Japanese elites into three categories: the imperial elites, the local elites and the village elites. The first two elites cultivate vertical networks to carry out government policies. The imperial elites dominate the central decision-making institutions, as court officials or supervisors sent to localities in China, and as members of the Imperial council, parliament or ministries in Japan. The local elites, versed with local practices and

---

resources, accommodate the central executives by carrying out bureaucratic functions, such as taxation. Village elites, mostly wealthy farmers and emerging merchant classes, are “non-governing” elites. Nevertheless, village elites in China network with local and imperial elites, or even enter into the Chinese meritocracy system through civil examinations. In Japan, Bakumatsu (late-Tokugawa 1853-1867) village elites sustain fief lords, Daimyos and Samurais, and continue to act as regional deputies of the central government later under the Prussian-styled prefect system in the Meiji period.

Elites in China and Japan gain their status through different paths. China’s meritocracy system introduces great social mobility: if a person passes the civil exams, he becomes a scholar official and enters the elite class. In fact, except for members from the royal family, one must gain this state-certified status to enter or remain in the elite class, regardless of wealth and power. Such a system of exogenous configuration of elite status inflicts the Chinese elites a sense of “insecurity”, as the state (usually represented by the emperor) can deny their status at will. This sense of insecurity propels the elites to seek for diversification. While land ownerships buy them entrance ticket to the elite class, land-holding of Chinese elites, much less in the British measurement, is not a major source of income. Elites divert to commercial activities for major income during Ming and Qing times. Military capacities also prove effective in acquiring elite status. However, although these resources confer real power, it does not guarantee one’s elite status. To sustain the status, one must enter the civil examination and gain legitimacy from the Emperor, as any other ordinary person. This system manages to eradicate nepotism, promote equity and most importantly, enhance the Confucius rule. In spite of passing the criteria listed above, Chinese elites need to demonstrate their symbolic capital, a combination of morality standard, family tradition, local influences and others invisible capital to receive local recognition of their status. Many elites establish extensive horizontal and vertical networks, or guanxi, to extend their influences and outperform others in socioeconomic competitions.

Within the imperial elites in China, a small group has inherited titles: the Manchurian eight-baner aristocrats, descendents of the eight military factions of the Qing founder, Nurhaci. Often they serve as high officials in the court, and the head of each flagship forms the “Eight-Ministers”, a preponderant power in Qing politics. Such hereditary status reflects the ethnic policies of Qing, in which Han people can’t gain certain ministry or military positions.

Japanese again differed significantly here from China. We examine both the traditional samurai class and the ruling oligarchs here. The original Japanese elite-class, the samurai, derived their title from birth and maintained the status for a lifetime. However, the Confucius doctrine in the Japanese society emphasizes an idiom of Authoritarian Situation Ethic, as Fukuzawa Yukichi explained -the elite status (authoritarian) is justified by the fulfillment of obligations, and for the Samurai class, the obligation to fight. However, since 1800, wars seldom visited Japan, and thus robbed off samurai’s raison d’etre. Rutherford Alcock, an English minister in 1850s Edo, vividly

---

4 Ibid., 306.
5 Ibid., 307.
depicted the scenes in the guardhouses: "generally occupied by boys or superannuated old men, who spend their whole time squatting on their knees and heels and either dozing or smoking the pipe of apathetic idleness."\(^7\) Furthermore, the samurai class was effaced after the cancelation of samurai stipends and later in the 1873 conscription law, which required every male citizen to join the army for at least 3 years. Although small scales of upsurges did occur, the samurai class as a whole was “not future-oriented radicals but backward looking fundamentalists.”\(^8\) This does not mean the samurai class has no remnants or influences in the Meiji revolution. The Bushido, or the ethics of Samurai, emphasizes the self-scrutiny and righteous of behaviors, which serves as a criteria and cultural heritage contributed to the strong sense of public services in the Meiji bureaucracies. Some samurais manage to use the last amount of money issued by the Meiji government before cancelling their stipend, to start entrepreneurship; while others enter the bureaucracies for civil services. However, the samurai class is not major threat or component during the Meiji restoration. This old feudalist-style governorship ceases to create a “single centralized authority” envisioned by Kido.\(^9\)

The elites who found the modern state of Japan, however, are another group of elites with enormous political powers – the old “aristocrats” ruling class. Thomas Smith describes this group of elites as “disgruntled members of the old ruling class alarmed at the discrepancy between the pretensions of the bakufu and the realities of its power.”\(^10\) They are mainly daimyos from wealthy provinces such as Satsuma and Choshu. In the first period of Meiji Japan (1868-1873), the triumvirate, Saigo Takamori, Okubo Toshimichi, and Kido Koin, joined under “a strong sense of unity, joint responsibility, and loyalty to the Throne”\(^11\) to form strong leadership for reforms. The Chosu-Satsuma coalition occupied the high arena of Japanese politics for the next forty years until the “Han clique” or Genro succeeded the triumvirate later and into the early 20th century, secured by marriage alliances.\(^12\)

**Elite Cohesiveness**

The level of elite cohesiveness reflects both the political center’s efforts to coordinate social capitals, and the elites’ efforts to cooperate with one another. We first look at the centrifugal forces including the imperial power and centralization efforts and then move to intra-elite interactions. We will assess the level of elite cohesion and its impacts on the reform policies, implementation and outcomes. In conclusion, we re-examine the democratic elite theory, and show how the condition of Japan and China may attribute to and expand the theory.

**The Emperor**

In assessing the impact of the Emperor, we must respect both his formal and informal powers. In societies such as China and Japan, Confucius ethics of monarchical absolutism and Neo-

---

\(^8\) Ibid., 38.
Shintoism concept of “God-emperor” had long ruled the ruling class. Formally, the emperor was regarded as the sole source of power and legitimacy, at least in symbolic meanings. Notably, the informal emperor power of China and Japan differed considerably. In China, Empress Ci Xi united with Prince Gong, the scapegoat we discussed at the beginning, to eradicate the powerful ministerial faction led by Su Shun in the 1861 coup d’etat (Xin Qiu Coup d’etat). Since then the Empress took imperial power, with the court disseminated into the Empress’ men and the Emperor’s men, each taking lead as time and events pushed onwards. Under such political turbulence, the governing theme turned to maintain the balance of power between factions even at the cost of national interests. Consequently, the most important figure in the political system, whether the Empress or the Emperor, had to align with factions in order to stabilize the regime. This alignment cultivated a set of political cults among court officials in the decades of Ci Xi’s Rule (1861-1908). The central arbitrator could no longer decide the political agenda all alone, but had to rely on consensus building. In Japan, however, while the Japanese emperor enjoyed no real political power, he was also free of Machiavelli politics. As Ward suggests, “the strongly oligarchic nature of Japanese power politics that served to make political authority and social position synonymous had much to do with perpetuating a condition in which a peacemaker possessed of only residual sovereignty continued to be useful.” This “residual sovereignty” of the Japanese Emperor rests mostly in legitimizing the victorious coalition. It is up to political factions themselves to maintain their status by alliance building, plotting and back-stabbing. Thus the Japanese Emperor acts as a moral judge over different issues, rather than a chief executive – this “mediator” role of the Meiji Emperor frees him from vested interests, and thus he can focus on judging the best policies for national interests. Although the emperor commands no coercive power, his symbolic power was highly revered and welcomed by the oligarchs in Japan, as Fukuzawa said:

Viewing the full sweep of his intellectual evolution, the emperor and religion were utilized only as temporary expedients, as crutches to maintain order in a competitive world and order itself was but a precondition for progress toward a rational civilization

The Chinese emperor accommodates policies to aristocratic maneuvers. As a result, he needs to take the blame once domestic grievance aggregates. The Japanese emperor, in contrary, representing the people and justice in the political system, remains neural in political fights. The emperor’s power is restrained in symbolic meanings, but this protects him from taking responsibilities once policies fail. This may explain why under the same Confucius ideology, Chinese imperial symbolism would induce hatred and upsurges such as the Taiping Rebellion and Nien campaigns (Shanxi Province) while Japanese imperial symbolism cultivated a strong nationalism and recognized as a “constructive and steadying force in the new era.” When analyzing the elite patterns in China and Japan, we must include the emperor as a main variable in elite cohesion in China, but exclude the emperor in Japan.

Centralization

Centralization impacts the elites' behaviors in central decision making institutions. In China’s case, some argue that Taiping Rebellion is a devolution of central powers to localities, and brings to the local elites an uncontested dominion over social control. Two evidences support this argument. First, expelling the Qing’s low-level bureaucracies, Taiping maintained the local elites to perform basic bureaucratic functions, such as tax collections. Second, the local military units against the rebellion, lacking of government stipend, autonomously financed themselves and recruited personnel's. A set of regional functioning “empires” with their own political system and social capitals popped up as a result. Local elites thus had the institutional support to gain independence or seize power from the Court, but they didn’t choose to do so. For one thing, the Taiping reign also incorporated non-elites into its Xiangguan (Village officers) system, which disrupted the former configuration of power, shattering old networks and posing great political risks due to inexperienced farmers’ rule. For another, local military units quickly dissolved soon after Qing conquered the Taiping Rebellion capitol, Nanjing.16

The most fundamental reason why Chinese local elites would not easily challenge central rule lies in how the elites gain their status. Different from feudal elites in most empires who derive their status from “unassailable claim over a basic social resources”, namely land, castle or titles in the case of Japan, Chinese elites depend on a set of more flexible yet less secure resources.17 For the Chinese, only passing the civil examination can officially grant them the elite status, or maintaining their heritage privileges. In other words, without internalizing the Confucius ideology, the elite candidates will not have the chance to rule.18 Just as Esherick concludes, “The outward pull of the examinations and the bureaucracy and the externally derived status from state-conferrred office of degrees directed elite interests toward the center and caused the often-noted circulation between national and local elites” –local Chinese elites don’t stay in their regions but are pulled towards the central government.19 Besides a wholesale adoption of the Confucius ideology, Chinese elites also need to control other resources in order to meet the entry-level requirements and maintain daily expenses. Landownership has been an essential resource, yet from Ming dynasty on, commercial gains has played increasingly important roles. To decrease risks and increase gains, elites establish quasi joint-venture groups called the “kin organizations”, in which several families with the same surname integrate individual resources for socioeconomic competitions. The evolution of mercantile practices also prompted the local elites to establish horizontal networks with local elites, in which they could gather capital, human resources or information, as well as vertical networks with higher officials, even with some court officials, to pledge for rights for monopoly, cross-regional tariff reductions and other benefits. After all, the local elites cooperate with other partners, the clerical, military and bureaucratic elites in a patronage-client relationship for mutual gains, interests conflicts can be mediated within this network. Even if real split does occur, clients can find other patrons in order to achieve the same goal. Commonly, aware of their precarious status lack of “unassailable” resources, the elites try to

16 Zhonglin Peng, Qing Shi Tong Jian (Beijing, 2002).
17 Esherick and Rankin, Chinese Local Elites, 313.
19 Esherick and Rankin, Chinese Local Elites, 314.
accommodate to each other instead of breaking the ties. Since both disruption of the old network and construction of a new one incurs enormous costs. Through these networks, Chinese elites, “arguably the most unified elite in the world”, remains such at least in the hierarchy level.20

A counter-argument states that Qing tried to centralize after the Taiping Rebellion, but failed to do so.21 Weakened by foreign and domestic threats, the central government no longer had the capacity to ensure policy implementation in every inch of its vast territory. Key variables such as financing, recruitment, and taxation of the central government fell out of standard, which might contribute to such a conclusion. While a weak central government invites localities to seize power, the localities may show their loyalty instead of defecting. Indeed, while farmers’ rebellion rose in the late imperial years (statistic hugely skewed due to Taiping Rebellion), local elites remained pacified.22 This testifies that the vertical level of elite cohesion remained high. Such autonomy even assisted economic reforms in the Self-Strengthening Movement with the expertise of the local merchant class; more importantly, regional autonomy also raises the predictability of policies independent from the factional fights in the political center.

Unlike China, Japanese elites rely on land ownership. In the Tokugawa era, village heads transfer taxes (often in rice) to Daimyos, and Daimyos pay Samurais they retain. This causes elites to depend on non-elites for life subsistence. Such an interlocking structure helps to constrain Daimyos under the ankin-kotai or alternate attendance system: the daimyos stay in Edo for half of the time, spending most revenues on transportation and luxuries and thus with no extra resources for rebellion. Except for the dependency, bureaucratic functions are usually carried out in consensus of local samurais and the village heads. Initially, Meiji Japan couldn't conduct cohesive and efficient policies in fiefs due to this institutional weakness. Quickly, the Meiji reformers realized the disunity in the hierarchical network and carefully devised a counter-strategy: the prefect system. Kido Koin, one of the Triumvirate in Early Meiji restoration, urged for a Unitarian rule, “There must be one national polity and one sovereign authority...and must not in the slightest degree the yielded to subordinates.”23 The Meiji leaders in 1871 abolished the fiefs in order to curtail the “parochial political culture” and promoted the “subject political culture”, essential in a “modern state”. The abolishing efforts carefully balanced the interests of the local elites and the governing elites.24 Quietly, through compromise, the Japanese government implanted local bureaucracies during 1867-1871, by investing heavily in “social terms, in role-coordination structures and functions” well before the 1888 formal introduction of the Prussian

20 Ibid., 314.
23 Tsunoda et. al. Source of Japanese Tradition, 141.
model. By 1882, “a new system of taxation, law, law enforcement, education, transportation, communication and public health [was] introduced”, ready for implementation.\(^{25}\)

While China might see Japan as a fragmented and weak state before 1871, in the following decade Japan had successfully centralized. It established the Prefect System in the local level to replace the old rule of village heads. The system carefully balanced the stake players, and introduced bureaucratic networks into the localities. China, with a cohesive hierarchy, did not enjoy actual unity of interests as Japan did. Although local elites did not and needed not stand against central ones, their local interests would reach the central policy-making institutions through this paternalistic network. However, as most of the provincial concerns remained regional, the impact of this vertical network was minimal.

**Rule of the Game**

The policy-making mechanisms of China and Japan deviate from each other. China lacks the institutionalization of power but forges policies mainly through aristocratic system. Usually several officials together bring a proposal to regular court meetings, other officials participate in the discussion, and the Emperor make the final decision. Direct emperor-code is another way to make policies, but often after consultation with officials. This process cultivates the motivation of forming strong factions in order to obtain more pro-voices in court discussion. The policies themselves carry strong vested interests, proposed in exchange of social networks. In Japan, however, policy makings flew the other way, from the low-ranking bureaucrats to central policy makers. Career bureaucrats have no vested interests in the political system and thus bring “a strong sprit of clannishness” to the oligarchy government.\(^{26}\) Usually, an official, normally from the “Dutch Scholars”, a group of scholars proficient with western technology, philosophy and politics by reading books brought in by the Dutch trades, from the low bureaucratic level proposes a policy, and the proposal goes through a chain of higher bureaucratic branches, finally to the oligarchy coalition. Officials can curtail or monitor the policies to avoid endangering their interests along the way, and thus lower officials always subordinate their interests below higher and general interests. This mechanism greatly reduces intra-elite conflicts since the oligarchs’ central role is to discuss and ratify the policies and can deny these policies anytime. This mechanism also reduces the incentives to form patron-client network with court officials, since they themselves cannot introduce policies.

While China enjoyed cohesive hierarchy as well as in the local submissiveness, it faced contending elite groups in the central government. The conservatives, led by Wo Ren, representing the interests of the conservative imperial wings overwhelmed the “Western affairs” faction first led by Prince Gong, and then by Li Hung Zhang in central and Zeng Guofan and others in regional levels. They argued against the Liberals that, as Wo Ren argued that the fundamental of a nation rests in courtesy but not tactics; in spirits but not techniques. Many officials and literati joined this group in proposals to the imperial court to protect their vested interests. Yet another faction blurred the situation. A group of low level bureaucracies from the


government school (Han Lin Yuan) and Anti-corruption officials (Du Cha Yuan), called Qing Liu party (clear flow clique), who did not have vested interests and was irritated by the social conditions in the late 19th century China, which bore enormous grievance. However, lacking the political resources and access to policy makings compared to the powerful court factions, they did not form a major faction at first. Later, when Empress Ci Xi, uninstalled the Su Shun clique, she turned to feel threatened by the prominent status of Prince Gong. Thus, she intentionally encouraged the rise of the Qing Liu party to contain the power of Yi Xin. She also used the Qing Liu party against regional powers led by Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan. The conservative faction led by Wo Ren strongly opposed institutional efforts towards infrastructure and education upgrades, since they regarded these as opposed to the fundamentalist Confucius ideas, in which the rules of forefathers should always be respected. The only leeway was in the military fields, and Li Hongzhang did establish several arsenals. However, the policies of self-strengthening movement, in the 60s military-oriented, 70s and 80s industrial-oriented first from state-entities to joint venture entities between states and the private sector, never escaped a fate of vested interests of generating profits rather than true entrepreneurship. Moreover, the political fluctuation in the central government disrupted the continuity of the policies, which was eventually put to dead after the 1894 Sino-Japan War, as the whole fleet of North Sea Navy smashed by the Meiji navy.

Japan, in contrast, celebrated a united elite class. With a dissolved samurai class, and still fledgling merchant class, and local village heads under bureaucratic control, Japan did not have much trouble in maintaining the inter-group elite cohesiveness. Although the seven members of the genro were from different regions, they had strong sense of unity and a shared primary political agenda of gaining independence and later position among the comity of nations, thus they was not drawn into regional preferences, but strived to maintain the Sacho-balance in the cabinet as a whole. Although there were “shifts of alignment and misalignment” within the ruling elites, they cooperated to make the best policies and avoided continuous contentions. Historians applaud this cooperation as follows.

If Ito may be taken as the great symbol of cohesive unity, stability and continuity in Meiji Japan, Okuma represents constructive opposition, vigorous but gradual reform, and optimistic acceptance of the West.

With the emperor as the judge and a coordinated government, the Meiji rule displayed the capacity of “moderation” that China clearly lacked. The policy making process also contributed to such a moderation feature, since elites, stripped of patron-client bonds, had to compete for their prestige by conducting popular policies in light of Japan’s interests: strengthening and enriching the country.

Politically, Japanese elites were more flexible politically than their Chinese contemporaries, since they acquired status through birth, and thus didn’t need to internalize the Confucian ideas in political practices. This had also contributed to the celebrated cohesion in facing the Western

---

27 Ibid., 203.
world and initiating modernization measures, which might greatly challenge the supremacy of Confucian ideology. As a result, the Japanese applied a much profound reform from the educational areas, to military, to social life, and last, political reforms. Although the Meiji constitution, as Hall criticizes, “merely gave legal form to the effort of the oligarchy to suppress the movement for democratic rights,” it did contain democratization elements such as separation of powers, parliamentary participatory system, respect for law and rule of law, property rights, and personal freedoms. Japan at least had created an institutional force for development, a much more powerful force than the factional forces of the Chinese liberals in a secular court practicing power politics.

Predicting the Results

When applying elite theories in the cases of China and Japan, we find both overlaps and discrepancies. Harold Crouch and James Morley, in their studies of Asian societies, conclude that “Where democratization has taken place, it has involved elites who have lost their cohesiveness, and hence, their managerial capacity, leaving them vulnerable to social forces grown at least momentarily participatory.” This applied perfectly in the Taiping Rebellion and Toubakundo, as in the first case local elites lost connectedness to central government and formed connections to the Taiping regime, though in a transitive manner, as they continued to rule after the Taiping’s defeat; and in the Japanese case, the disgruntled daimyos from Choshu and Satsuma fought against the Shogun and initiated the first wave of democratization in Japan. However, this theory fails to address one important endogenous factor: the time. The time is important in the Chinese case, since although the Chinese elites lacked cohesiveness within themselves, no other classes were strong enough to take the initiative to democratization: the farmer class remained disorganized, and the urban elites still slept in cradle. In the Japanese case, the elites, complaisant with the international environment and domestic problems, dedicated to democratization themselves. We must consider social conditions and interests as well as motivation of the ruling elites in deciding whether democratization will take place. Meanwhile, the democratic elite theory explains China's situation, where elite disunity and quiescent constituents contributed to unstable authoritarianism. But again, it fails to account for a society in transition between authoritarian and democracy, or the oligarchic nature of many semi- and pseudo- democracies as the feudal Japan.

We thus here add to the theory that, in an oligarchic regime with high elite cohesion, the motivation of the oligarchic coalition will decide the path of political evolution. As in the Japanese case, the Choshu-Satsuma elites, with real powers in hand, chose to trade their monopoly on respective fiefs in exchange for unification and democratization. The Japanese elites sacrificed personal interests for national ones, due to high pressure from both domestic nationalism and foreign threats. While the elites could, with their military and economic advantages, control Japan and turn it into a military state, they chose not to do so. Instead, they engaged in profound

---

reforms which would later introduce Japan as a member of the “comity of nations”. Their intentions to democratize decided what Japan became later.

In opposite, the theory will also predict that in an oligarchic regime with low elite cohesion, factional rivalry often leads to a political deadlock for policies introducing profound changes, as in China. Conflicts within the elite groups in reform eras results in a prisoner’s dilemma, as reforms always require eradicating some established interests, and each group struggles to cut off other’s interests instead of their own. Every group will focus on the relative gains instead of overall social benefits. Consequently, few policies are carried out with consistency and effectiveness.

Can a single elite coalition rule China? Is democratization in China feasible considering complex social interests and their need for stability? Does democracy in times of transition lack institutional strength in conducting policies? While we have assessed the level of cohesiveness in China and Japan, these questions still perplex us, and no natural experiments answer to them. However, while we sit back and criticize historical figures with hindsight, they have no choice but to act upon the happenings in the time given. Prince Gong would not know gaining Xian Feng's imperial will unlock a political landslide; nor would the shogun realize the loss of national power signals a serendipitous start for Japanese modernization.